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Start Treating U.S. Intelligence As Vital Business

Capital Chronicle

by Suzanne Garment

Here are some snapshots of Washington in the week of the Tripoli bombing:

The president was on television explaining the reasons for the air strike. On March 25, he said, orders went out from Tripoli to attack Americans in West Berlin. On April 4 the terrorists told Tripoli they would attack the next day. On April 5 they reported success.

The U.S. will pay a price for the president's specificity. But no one doubted that he had to speak in this much detail.

On Monday at 4 p.m. EST, administration officials began confidential consultations on the Libyan strike with the congressional leadership, consistent with the War Powers Act. Afterward, journalists learned from a couple of senators that the president would be making a big statement at 9 that night. The story that U.S. action was imminent made the CBS news at 6:30 p.m.—before the raid actually began.

At breakfast Thursday, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger emphasized once more that the U.S. fighter-bombers had homed in precisely on terror-related facilities. "The targets were effectively covered," he said with some satisfaction.

Later he mentioned Libya's report, widely accepted by the press, that Muammar Qadhafi's adopted baby daughter had been killed. The secretary said he'd been told there was no evidence that Col. Qadhafi had in fact ever adopted a child. Of course, Mr. Weinberger added, "not an awful lot is known about Libya."

The Libyan incident has us relearning basic lessons about international conflict, intelligence and secrecy. Before we forget what we have seen, we should try to turn these lessons into some concrete improvements in intelligence policy.

Many of us noted, for instance, that an F-111 is not just a piece of waste, fraud and abuse. To take another example, we saw that when you are bombing a city, bravery and physical skill are of no use unless you know where your targets are. Or another: You can be very good at collecting information through machines, yet dangerously deficient in the intelligence work that has to be done by humans.

We have also been reminded that leaked information can invite disaster. We have seen once more that when it comes to secrets, the U.S. Congress is a sieve.

No one thought much about any of these things a decade ago, when it was open season on government secrets in general and the intelligence agencies in particular.

Intelligence was seen as a moral issue. Out of this view came the Senate's new Select Committee on Intelligence in 1976, and a House counterpart in 1977. We also got a law saying that the president must directly approve any U.S. covert action and tell Congress about it.

The results were predictable. Covert actions became riskier for presidents, and therefore declined. The new committees, 29 congressmen plus their staffs, made it harder to keep secrets. Sometimes the Hill leaked. Sometimes executive-branch dissidents leaked to the Hill, which then leaked in turn. After one of these disclosures, congressmen would publicly add their own two cents and serve as an amplifier for the leaked information.

Beyond specific committees and laws, the intellectual climate got clammy. Congressmen became obsessed with procedural prerogative and phony legalism. We ended up having open hearings on whether to dispense covert aid. We began to see in the press actual leaked stories of U.S. covert-action proposals, and no punishment rained down on the perpetrators.

Also, some people in the oversight committees started thinking that they should actually help manage the intelligence enterprise. This fall, the Senate committee's staff drafted a "National Intelligence Strategy: Guidelines for FY 87." It was turned out to be an awesomely sophomoric document that could not really be fixed, because it treated intelligence as a commodity you can produce more or less the way you make widgets.

In short, for many people intelligence is still an ideological plaything rather than an enterprise whose results matter intensely in the real world.

Some of this can be fixed only by a broad change in attitudes toward intelligence, the legislative-executive balance, and secrecy. Some can be helped along by modest structural fixes.

For instance, what are we doing with two intelligence oversight committees, when we could do the job with one reasonably sized joint committee?

There is already some feeling in each house that you would get more mutual confidence, hence better oversight, by having fewer fingers in the pie. Rep. Henry Hyde has introduced a joint-committee resolution in the House. Sen. Dan Quayle is pushing the idea in the Senate.

The plan has a big problem, of course: It would deprive some congressmen of their places at the intelligence table. You can even find some people who criticize the idea on the merits. These people talk about checks and balances. They say it's good for lots of congressmen to learn something about the intelligence field.

But the oversight process has more important purposes than to serve as a tutorial for broad sections of Congress. As for checks and balances, is our intelligence apparatus so tough and bad that a single congressional watchdog committee cannot cope with it?

In the quiet after the Libyan attack, Washington heard the familiar sound of offended congressmen, whining that they had not been consulted enough about it. This lack of seriousness shows why we would be better off with fewer congressmen intimately involved in intelligence issues. And it is this type of impulse that we all have to start controlling in ourselves if intelligence matters are to be treated seriously again.